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Article

Breaking Generational Curses: Success and Opportunity among Black Children of Incarcerated Parents

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ABSTRACT

Black children are disproportionately represented among the children of incarcerated mothers and fathers in the United States. Research has largely focused on negative life outcomes (e.g., incarceration, negative behaviors, school dropout rates) of these children. Recently, studies have begun to look at success; however, children of incarcerated parents are typically placed into a homogenous group without considering racial implications. Using a critical race theoretical perspective, this study highlights the counternarrative of success by analyzing 59 in-depth interviews. Findings center on the ways adult Black children of incarcerated parents define success, which differs from middle-class, Eurocentric definitions of economic success, college graduation, marriage, and children as the success indicators. Success in relationships, community, education, and mental health emerged as the themes that define success. Findings show that their relationship with others (including their incarcerated parent), giving back to the community, educational experiences, and improving their mental health were indicators that they have "made it." With support from their personal networks, they can succeed despite institutional and structural barriers. This study may assist policymakers, organizations, and schools with shifting societal perceptions to tailor resources for Black children of incarcerated parents to help invest in their futures.

KEYWORDS: children of incarcerated parents; parental incarceration; pathways to success; black children; positive childhood experiences.

Incarceration in the United States is, unfortunately, a common experience in the lives of many children. In recent estimates, more than five million children have currently or previously experienced parental incarceration (Maruschak, Bronson, and Alper 2021). Incarcerated parents of minor children comprise 47 percent of state and 50 percent of federal prison populations, with the average number of children per incarcerated parent being two (Glaze and Maruschak 2010; Maruschak et al. 2021; Mumola 2000). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, incarceration has slightly decreased; however, over 2.2 million are still incarcerated, millions are arrested, and even more are on probation and parole (Carson 2021; Herring 2021). Black people are disproportionately represented in the prison population; therefore, children of incarcerated parents are disproportionately Black. Nationally, one in

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twelve children experiences parental incarceration compared to one in nine Black children (Murphey and Cooper 2015; Paquette 2015).

Generally, research on children of incarcerated parents centers on negative behaviors connected to delayed development, mental health concerns, educational shortcomings, school violence, and delinquency (Dwyer Emory 2018; Jacobsen 2019; Kjellstrand et al. 2019; Wildeman 2020; Young et al. 2020). Historical research tends to group children of incarcerated parents into a homogenous group, not distinguished by race, or it centers on the negative life outcomes of Black children. Contemporary research has emerged on the success and resilience of children of incarcerated parents to counter the negative images and stigma often associated with this population. However, success scholarship still tends to use homogeneous grouping and centers on the experiences of incarcerated parents. Additionally, success and positive life outcome measures used in empirical studies align with Eurocentric views and do not adequately uplift the experiences and outlook of Black children of incarcerated parents (Hollins 2022), hereinafter "BCOIPs." There is much more known about the shortcomings among BCOIPs than their strengths, and these strengths are described through a white gaze.

It is important to understand the concepts of resilience and achievements in the lives of BCOIPs, because such insight could balance the current database of scholarly works. The success narratives among BCOIPs shed light on a perspective that recent research has attempted to capture yet fails to contextualize fully. Because incarceration is associated with racism, extreme shame, stigma, and silence (Hollins 2022), how BCOIPs feel, in their own words, takes on a greater significance (Muhammad 2011; Muhammad, Gatewood, and Turner 2021). We have yet to learn about the social thought of BCOIPs (Noel and Green 2022). It is important to understand how they feel; it is equally important to understand what BCOIPs think.

This study deepens the understanding of how adult BCOIPs view success and how their success is influenced and motivated by their family, friends, and community. By analyzing 59 in-depth interviews through a critical race theoretical perspective, we examined how adult BCOIPs define success, and find that the definition strays from "traditional" measures. Centering on the lived experiences and voices of BCOIPs, this study discusses how children blaze new paths toward successful futures. The objective is to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence adult BCOIPs' definitions of success. This may assist policymakers, community organizations, and schools with shifting societal perceptions, allowing them to tailor resources for BCOIPs to help invest in their futures.

BACKGROUND

Although we can ascertain the exact numbers of incarcerated parents through large-scale prisoner surveys, the equivalent information for children of incarcerated parents still does not exist. Contemporary estimates highlight that the number of children affected by current or prior parental incarceration is increasing. For example, federal and state prisoners in 2016 reported being parents to approximately 1.5 million minor children (Maruschak et al. 2021). In the most recent estimates, these numbers have risen to at least 5 million children with current or prior parental incarceration experiences (Annie E Casey Foundation 2016; Murphey and Cooper 2015). These estimates are an undercount because they exclude children who did not reside with their parents before incarceration and those with parents under the correctional control of probation and parole (Eddy and Poehlmann-Tynan 2019; Herring 2021; Hollins 2022; Jones 2018; Wessler 2022). Therefore, the number of children experiencing parental incarceration would surpass the estimated five million, making this adverse childhood experience (ACE) (Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney 2021) a reality for millions of youth and adults in the United States. These shortcomings make it extremely difficult to establish the accurate scale of experiences among children of parental incarceration.

Generally, research shows that the challenges children of incarcerated parents face are substantial, including difficulty with transitioning into their adult lives, lower graduation rates, higher rates of unemployment, and a higher risk of becoming involved with the criminal legal system (Gabel and Shindledecker 1993; Johnson and Waldfogel 2002; Miller and Barnes 2015; Muhammad 2018; Muhammad et al. 2021; Murray, Farrington, and Sekol 2012; Noel and Najdowski 2020). Findings further describe outcomes of intergenerational crime, detention, and incarceration among youth and adults of incarcerated parents (Wildeman 2020). Intergenerational incarceration affects stress levels, mental health, chronic health conditions, and substance use, in addition to poverty, stigma, discrimination, and housing instability (Davis and Shlafer 2017; Geller et al. 2012; Lee et al. 2014;

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Muhammad 2018; Schnittker and John 2007; Turney and Haskins 2014; Wakefield and Wildeman 2013; Wildeman 2020).

Often left out of research findings are experiences of racism (Muhammad et al. 2021) among children of incarcerated parents. Research has shown that not all children have the same experiences of parental incarceration (Hollins 2022). Therefore, some children of incarcerated parents may be judged by race and their presumed "guilt by association" (Hollins 2019) with an incarcerated parent, while other children are not doubly judged in this manner. Uniquely among BCOIPs are these intergenerational experiences of racism, in addition to the "traditional" collateral consequences and challenges that other children of incarcerated parents are exposed to. Therefore, BCOIPs have been reported to be more at risk for intergenerational incarceration than their peers (Jones and Seabrook 2017).

Black Children of Incarcerated Parents (BCOIPs)

Black children are disproportionately represented among the children of formerly and/or currently incarcerated mothers and fathers in the United States. Existing research remains limited on the lived experiences of BCOIPs who endure the incarceration of one or both parents and/or at different stages in their lives (i.e., childhood versus adulthood). Little research has explicitly focused solely on the population of Black youth (see Kopak and Smith-Ruiz 2015), with limited scholarship taking a critical and intersectional theoretical perspective (Noel and Green 2022). It is important to be cognizant that parental incarceration does not affect all Black children the same because they are not a homogenous group (Poehlmann-Tynan and Turney 2021). Therefore, BCOIPs will take various paths with a multitude of outcomes.

BCOIPs become social casualties of a parent's behavior which affects their social standing in society. The stigma of incarceration extends beyond the parent and results in unintended consequences for their children (Luther 2016). The lives of BCOIPs, similar to their incarcerated parents, are criticized to persuade others that BCOIPs' lives should not matter (Hollins 2019). BCOIPs are stigmatized, villainized, and labeled as future prisoners as early as birth in ways that white children are not (Muhammad 2018). Goffman defines stigma as "deeply discrediting" characteristics that prevent one from being socially accepted, and this stigma motivates the stigmatized to hide the mark whenever possible (1974:1). This framework applies to Black children marked by a parent's incarceration. The social stigma attached to incarceration encourages Black families to conceal their situation, view it as problematic, and stigmatize those incarcerated (Braman 2002; Clear 2002; Richie 2002). This stigmatization can often cause family members to disassociate themselves from their incarcerated relatives. Researchers have discovered that people are less likely to disclose a problem with a stigma attached (Hagen and Myers 2003). Black children are warned to maintain silence and hide their situation to avoid obtaining a "courtesy stigma" (Goffman 1974), also known as "stigma by association" (Neuberg et al. 1994). That is, they may wish to refrain from being stigmatized themselves because of the association with a parent dehumanized by incarceration.

Resilience and Success among Children of Incarcerated Parents

Although research often views children of incarcerated parents as having negative life outcomes, contemporary research has shown that this population can lead successful lives. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are often cited in scholarship because traumatic events in childhood, such as parental incarceration, can be "linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance misuse in adulthood" (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2019). On a scale of one to ten ACEs, the average adult in the United States experiences one; however, children of incarcerated parents generally score four or higher (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2019; Muhammad et al. 2021; Murphey and Cooper 2015). Despite the high number of ACEs, children of incarcerated parents can also have Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) and achieve success (Crouch, Smith, and Andersen 2022; Kremer et al. 2022; Muhammad 2018; Muhammad et al. 2021). PCEs for youth, particularly being exposed to positive support from their caregivers and teachers, have shown increases in youths' educational success, better physical and mental health outcomes, and improved relationships with their incarcerated parents (Boch and Ford 2021; Crouch et al. 2022; Kremer et al. 2022). By focusing

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on the PCEs, researchers and policymakers can aim to increase those types of experiences in the lives of children of incarcerated parents.

Children of incarcerated parents not only have success and positive life outcomes, but they show resiliency as well. Although parental incarceration exposes children to prolonged stress due to financial insecurity, stigma, school and home disruptions, these children apply adaptation techniques to combat adversity (Ashmitha and Annalakshmi 2020; Boch and Ford 2021; Muhammad 2018). Adaptation includes mental health coping skills, navigation skills in obtaining resources, and protective strategies that are used to resist negative situations (Ashmitha and Annalakshmi, 2020; Muhammad 2018). The resilience and self-motivation of children of incarcerated parents often fuel their success and ensure that they can thrive despite their sometimes-negative environmental conditions.

Although the above summary describes the scholarship on success and resilience, it is important to note, that it is through a lens that centers on whiteness and the dominant culture's views. Research on success tends to group all children of incarcerated parents into a homogenous group, and limited studies focus on BCOIPs (see Boch and Ford 2021; Goldstein et al. 2021). Criminologists often use the "middle-class measuring rod" (Cohen 1955) by focusing on employment and education as measures of success. Research on the success of those incarcerated and their children tends to center on recidivism or entering into the criminal legal system (Andersen et al. 2020; DeVeaux 2022; Heidemann, Cederbaum, and Martinez 2016). Black people often define success differently from white people or expand their definition of what they consider success (Hall 2022; Wiebold and Spiller 2017). Alternative views of success have shown that helping others within the community, self-care, self-love, reconnection, and better relationships with family and friends are traits of successful people (Andersen et al. 2020; DeVeaux 2022; Hall 2022; Howard et al. 2017; Killens 2012; Wiebold and Spiller 2017; Zaff 1999). Studies of personal definitions of success focus on the formerly incarcerated (Andersen et al. 2020; DeVeaux 2022; Heidmann et al. 2016); however, there is a dearth of qualitative literature on their children (Nesmith and Ruhland 2008), particularly Black children.

THEORY

Critical race theory (CRT) will center this study's research on the lives of BCOIPs. CRT critiques society by framing racial oppression and exploitation and analyzes possible solutions or reforms for social change (Delgado, Stefancic, and Harris 2012). In a society where Black people are disenfranchised by all social institutions, they have had to create alternative ways to navigate their environments. Although there has been scholarship on the success and resilience of BCOIPs, the majority of this research uses a lens that centers on a Eurocentric and capitalist view of success. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2017:46), "members of this country's dominant racial group cannot easily grasp what it is like to be nonwhite" therefore, scholars speak about this population in ways that align with their cultural views. Using the "middle-class measuring rod" for success obscures how Black people define success, which can be different from the definitions of white people (Andersen et al. 2020; DeVeaux 2022; Heidmann et al. 2016; Wiebold and Spiller 2017). By using this critical lens on BCOIPs, this study highlights the counter-storytelling narrative of this population. Counter-storytelling, a tenet of CRT, "aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority" (Delgado and Stefancic 2017:171). It is important that BCOIPs tell their stories, as research is often from a lens that centers whiteness (Hollins, Underwood, and Krupat 2019); therefore, this study centers how BCOIPs themselves define success. This is counter to success story narratives uplifted in the majority of scholarship.

Interest convergence, another tenet of CRT, states that "the majority group tolerates advances for racial justice only when it suits its interest to do so" (Delgado and Stefancic 2017:177). The lives of BCOIPs are often shaped by racist and deficit model resources and research. Research highlights the negative life outcomes of these children as they enter adulthood, and resources provided to this population are limited and occur once problem behavior expresses itself (Annie E Casey Foundation 2016; Miller and Barnes 2015; Muhammad 2018; Murray et al. 2012; Noel and Najdowski 2020). The resources provided to this population often reflect the White Savior Industrial Complex (WSIC), "a network of practices, policies, organizations, and institutions responsible for reifying historical inequities by continuing to maintain white control over Black, Indigenous, and People of Color

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(BIPOC) through a complex system of predominantly white-led initiatives rooted in the preservation of dependence and powerlessness" (Kherbaoui and Aronson 2021:269). Using a CRT lens, this study will show an alternative view of the needs of this population through their own words and thoughts, which can help shape the type of positive outcomes and the future BCOIPs wish to have outside of the resources that are typically provided through the WSIC.

METHODS

Data Collection

To contextualize the lived experiences among BCOIPs, this study used a qualitative methodological approach. The study draws from interviews with children of incarcerated and/or formerly incarcerated parents in the United States. Study participants were recruited through convenience sampling after marketing through fliers and social media postings. To accommodate research difficulties in locating participants, often referred to as a "hidden population" (Muhammad 2011), we used snowball sampling by asking interviewees for participant referrals. Respondents received $25 compensation for participating in the study.

Data for this study came from a larger qualitative study (75 completed interviews) on the pathways to resilience and success among children of incarcerated parents. Therefore, to capture the experiences of BCOIPs, only interviewees who identified as Black were included. This study analyzes 59 in-depth interviews with Black adult children of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated parents. As seen in Table 1, the majority of the sample was female (n=49; 83 percent). The age of the BCOIPs is represented as the age at the time of the interview. Fifty-six percent of BCOIPs were young adults (n=33; 18 – 29 years). The number of BCOIPs experiencing paternal incarceration (n=34; 58 percent) was much greater than those BCOIPs experiencing maternal incarceration (n=10; 17 percent), which is common within this population. In addition, some BCOIPs reported experiences of having both an incarcerated mother and father (n=15, 25 percent). Most BCOIPs had parents who had served or had been sentenced to five or more years of incarceration (n=48; 81 percent). The majority of BCOIPs were residing in the South (n=37; 63 percent), followed by those residing in the Northeast (n=15; 25 percent).

Questions centered around BCOIPs lived experiences before, during, and after parental incarceration. They were asked questions about how they navigated parental incarceration as an adult and child, whether parental incarceration impacted their attitudes toward the criminal legal system, and the challenges they overcame that led to their current success, resilience, and triumphs. In-person and virtual interviews ranged from approximately 45 minutes to 2.5 hours. Interviewees were asked to submit a minimum of five photographs that highlighted their journey toward success. The provided photos were used to aid subjects in a life-history narrative shared with the interviewer. The objective of this study was to gain better understanding of the factors that influenced whether children of incarcerated parents would lead a crime-free life. Thus, the primary focus of the larger study was to identify pathways of resilience. Names and identifiers were changed to maintain anonymity.

Data Analysis

Study data collected were analyzed through an interpretive and descriptive lens. Interpretation focuses on describing the process and experience rather than explaining them. Narrative interviews explored the life stories and pathways of interviewees. All three authors of this study carefully read and reviewed transcribed interview texts to identify emergent themes. The coding process consisted of a four-step process that included (1) analysis of the same transcript until all three coders gained consensus; (2) discussions about emerging themes; (3) agreement on a coding strategy to maintain consistent procedures among all coders; and (4) working through a single merged database to allow congruence among themes and categories for further analysis. NVivo software was used to assign and extract codes and analyze data.

RESULTS

Research typically shows BCOIPs through a lens that either centers on their deficiencies or views their success through a Eurocentric lens. This research shows that adult BCOIPs can have positive

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Table 1. Interviewee Characteristics[a]

Age		
18 to 29	33	56%
30 to 49	23	39%
50 and up	2	3%
Total	58	98%
Sex		
Female	49	83%
Male	10	17%
Total	59	100%
Location[b]		
South	37	63%
Northeast	15	25%
West	5	8%
Midwest	2	3%
Total	59	99%
Involvement in Criminal Justice System		
Yes	12	20%
No	42	76%
Total	54	92%
Parent Incarcerated		
Mother	10	17%
Father	34	58%
Both Mother and Father	15	25%
Total	59	100%
Length of Parent Incarceration (Mother)		
Less Than A Year	6	24%
1 Year to 5 years	6	24%
5 years or More	11	44%
Total	23	92%
Length of Parent Incarceration (Father)		
Less Than A Year	4	8%
1 Year to 5 years	6	12%
5 years or More	37	76%
Total	47	96%

a. Unknown data are not included; therefore numbers may be less than 100%.
b. Based on U.S. Census Bureau regions

life outcomes that align with their own views of success. When asked "how do you define success," 57 interviewees (96 percent) gave a definition that was different from a status quo definition of economic success, typically associated with middle-class values. Interviewees described success as peace, enjoying life, loving yourself, happiness, working toward your personal goals, being a parent, graduating, and having freedom. Some definitions include their determination not to enter the criminal legal system and to avoid going to prison, which 42 (76 percent) accomplished. Interviewees were aware that their definition of success was different from the capitalistic view. The majority of participants aligned with Kanida, who stated:

> Normally people like attribute success to monetary stuff and it's just different means, that are like, you know, you have a high-paying job, you finished school, you've done all that. Like, it's always

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> something that's more situated in a hierarchy than anything. So I'm always like [Okay.] this isn't success for me, and what I do personally that drives me, that I feel like makes me happy and satisfied with my life at the end of the day.

Anye reiterated this sentiment:

> Success is like, is, is when you give yourself validation. That's success... real success isn't determined by how much money you have in your bank account, how, how many people love you, how many people follow you, how many people like your pictures. That's not success. Success is when you do the things that you love to do and you're proud of it.

The majority of interviewees were raised in low-income, urban areas; economic success was harder to obtain due to institutional and structural inequality. Nee stated that "living in the hood, that's successful," because you are often in survival mode and as long as you "live to see another day," you are a success. Using a capitalist and Eurocentric lens on success, these narratives would be overlooked.

Success in relationships, community, education, and mental health emerged as the four themes within the interviewees' definitions of success. Many focused on how relationships with their incarcerated parents and family were important to their success. They wanted to attend college, not because of society's values, but because of their parents or family. Thirty interviewees (51 percent) believed they were on the road to success, and that was manifested by their being able to help their community and by taking care for their own mental health. These definitions of success provide a counternarrative to success stories centered on economics and obtaining middle-class status.

Relationship with Parent

Past research on parent-child relations during incarceration uses a deficit-based approach highlighting deleterious outcomes for BCOIPs. Society and the literature undermine the Black incarcerated parents' ability to foster healthy relationships and positively influence their children's decisions (Aaron and Dallaire 2010; Murray et al. 2012). When a parent is classified as criminal, it is assumed children will imitate the parent's criminal behaviors if they stay connected. Countering this notion, interviewees expressed strong parent-child attachments and real examples of successful people who created a pathway to their success and the existing negative narrative as defective. Tony stated:

> People just didn't understand it. They didn't get it because I guess I didn't fit their normal thought of what a child of an incarcerated parent and if I was a successful child of an incarcerated parent, what that meant to them was that I had no relationship with that incarcerated parent. Just no way you have a connection to that person and you still chose to go this route. The story for people who want to believe that the apple falls far from the tree and that person is totally opposite from their parents. Because they don't see any good. And your incarcerated parent. I think that's the biggest detriment to what people will try to do even within families right like ya know.

Researchers discussed parental relationships with interviewees and findings show that contact with incarcerated parents produced positive outcomes for these adult BCOIPs. As Table 2 shows, 80 percent maintained contact with their incarcerated fathers and 86 percent with their incarcerated mothers. Contact with their parents occurred from childhood through adulthood. BCOIPs with incarcerated fathers exchanged mail and letters (63 percent), spoke over the phone (57 percent), and had in-person visits (57 percent). Those with incarcerated mothers typically had high rates of in-person visits (82 percent), in addition to phone calls (64 percent), and many mailed letters and photos (59 percent). Interviewees reported slightly higher rates of contact with their incarcerated parents than have been nationally reported. Prior research states 78 percent of children of incarcerated parents have contact with their fathers and 85 percent with their mothers (Glaze and Maruschak 2010). National numbers for contact with parents group all children of incarcerated parents into a homogenous group; therefore, there needs to be more information about BCOIPs' points of contact. Interviewees stated that during their communication with their incarcerated parent(s), they spoke about parent-child interactions, school, peer relationships, current events, fears and difficulties, and adjusting to new roles

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Table 2. Contact with Incarcerated Parent[a]

Contact with Mother		
In Person	18	82%
Mail	13	59%
Call or Video	14	64%
No Contact	3	14%
Total BCOIPs with mother contact	19	86%
Contact with Father		
In Person	25	57%
Mail	31	63%
Call or Video	28	57%
No Contact	10	20%
Total BCOIPs with father contact	39	80%

a. Some interviewees had multiple forms of contact.

and responsibilities. These incarcerated parents actively listened to their children and were adamant about remembering essential events to give encouragement, congratulations, and/or prayer. BCOIPs reported that consistent contact with their incarcerated parents created ease in their daily lives, which promotes positive outcomes. This was stated by Shannon when she said:

> Whenever my mom called, I answered the phone. Whether I was at work, at school, I never, you know, I, I don't remember there ever, like we never said, "Okay, I'ma call you at this time." Those daily phone calls and daily emails, that took me a long way. Had I not, you know, been able to talk to my mom as much as I was, you know, that probably would have hurt me more.

Receiving guidance, motivation, and appreciation resulted in BCOIPs' passion for countering the negative narrative because they respected their parents' opinions and feelings. According to Issa, her incarcerated mother, whom she described as "very strategic," spoke about how that gave her direction:

> Well she knows like I'm like sensitive about these things to make sure that you focus on this. Like very she's like very strategic. She's very intelligent, and she was parenting from prison. "Make sure you go to church," "What are y'all focusing on in church this month?" She was send us Bible quotes, give us a direction, almost like a lesson plan [pauses] so it was, it was, she was very directional. For sure.

Interviewees credited their success and resilience to their parents because they shared similar character traits. Like many interviewees, Aliyah shared:

> My dad, he's a sweet person. He's very smart, like very smart. He's a go getter. If somebody tell him no, he always finds a way to do things. I feel like that's where I get my hustle from. Yeah. That's it. He's very kind. He's smart. He's very innovative. He's very resilient also. He's very resilient. Yes. Some traits of my resiliency I get from him.

Findings show that most interviewees idolize their parents for their strength and resilience and view them as successes. They were inspired to make them proud. Aligned with other interviewees, Summer stated:

> I think my dad was really my biggest role model. And seeing his success coming home from prison, and graduating in prison, doing programs in there, came home, he's a Program Manager for the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, and he makes a shit ton of money now. And I'm like, "Your first job out of prison, you're making $200,000 a year, who does that?"

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While a small percentage (n=3, 14 percent with mothers and n=10, 20 percent with fathers) of interviewees did not have any contact or maintain contact with their incarcerated parents, these adult BCOIPs still had success and showed resilience. Existing research shows that several factors limit Black incarcerated parent-child contacts, such as parental inconsistency, foster care, gatekeeping, lack of resources (expenses of collect calls, distance of facility, etc.), stigma, and death of the parent (Shaw 2022; Tasca 2016). Interviewees that had no contact with their parent(s) expressed desires to have a relationship with them or chose not to have relations at all. Those who desired and prayed for a lifelong relationship had thoughts similar to Lala's:

> And so I just wanted to get closer with my parents, like I say, I never lived with them, so I didn't know them. Yeah, I knew their names, where they stay.... You know what I'm saying? But I didn't have my own personal relationship with them, that was like one of my daily prayers.

In contrast, realizing the toxicity within their parent-child relationship, some BCOIPs were driven to create change and succeed on their own. Those who chose not to speak with their parents indicated that success comes from their decision to prioritize themselves first. Amiya said:

> And she's never like — my mom has never not in a day said I'm sorry. She's never said I'm sorry. I have given my mother the benefit of the doubt so many times. Like, and she just does not — she just feels like letting me down. I asked myself, why am I not doing something? What is wrong with me here? I'm not where I need to be in my life. And, like, I just kind of follow my own path. I ran away to Texas. And I'm doing a lot for me without her guidance. She doesn't realize—the more I stay away from her the more I do better.

Although these interviewees did not have contact or a relationship with their incarcerated parents, the relationship influenced their positive life outcomes. These adult BCOIPs fostered healthy relationships with their social support villagers, which contributed to their positive life outcomes.

BCOIPs are labeled at-risk and future criminals because of parental incarceration (Cochran, Siennick, and Mears 2018; Phillips and Gates 2011). The criminalized imagery of Black incarcerated people (Alexander 2012; Muhammad 2018) creates anti-Black, racist rhetoric that makes their children guilty by association. Yet, BCOIPs continue to live crime-free lives precisely due to their strong parent-child attachments and support systems. Interviewees had critical and conscious conversations with their parents on the dangers of committing a crime and entering the criminal legal system. Due to these conversations many of the interviewees understood the origin of institutional racism, as most reported having only negative feelings about the system. Most do not blame their parents for criminality; rather, they know why the system was designed. Sharing similar stories with other interviewees, Kallie explained:

> For me in my situation, obviously, I didn't understand why my father was away my entire life for a nonviolent crime... I had all of these questions because I'm like, "You just don't send a black man away from their family their entire life for drugs. I mean, is that for real?" I always felt like I was robbed in that sense.

Interviewees' close relationships with their parents are a deterrence against delinquency. "T," was very close with her mother, who was in and out of jail for years; "T" had her mother's life as an example. It was because of her mother that she did not engage in similar behavior:

> my mom was really just trying to keep me away from the things that now I see like my homies back at home are in and out of jail. The girls that I grew up with, my godsisters, are pregnant, or their baby father's in jail. And as a kid I'm like, I don't realize, I'm just like, why won't, why can't I go outside? And you don't realize that like your parent at the time, they was really trying to shelter you away from those things.

Interviewees spoke to the counternarrative of relationships with incarcerated parents promoting success. Adult BCOIPs in this study personally define success with their incarcerated parents in mind.

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BCOIPs live successful and resilient lives by upholding familial and community connections and defying societal odds as they remain crime-free and achieve their versions of success.

Social Supports and Community

The status quo measurement of relational success in the United States is marriage and children (Reeves and Sawhill 2020). Having a personal definition, most interviewees reported that positive familial, peer, and professional relationships were essential factors in their success. Within the Black community, the African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child" conveys that a combination of several people are needed to provide a safe and healthy environment for children (Goode, Lewis, and Trulear 2011). This held true for participants as "villagers" gathered to assist BCOIPs who had physically lost access to a parent to incarceration. The relationships highlighted by BCOIPs included parents, guardians, siblings, extended family members, friends, fictive kin, romantic partners, and colleagues who contributed to the success achieved by BCOIPs. Their community's immense support, love, guidance, and prayers gave them a robust support system.

When 52 interviewees were asked, "Did you have resources and support that helped you become successful?" 48 (92 percent) answered yes. In addition, when 49 interviewees were asked, "What examples of success were around you?" 91 percent (n=45) of BCOIPs reported experiencing real-life examples of success within their network, and many stated their parents. San said, "my mom is successful, but in retrospect, she was the person who was like around me that was the most successful, you know, kind of because of her just even with two children saying, 'I'm gonna start this, um, this business and I'm gonna do this.'" While having models of success, of the 45 interviewees asked, 62 percent (n=28) reported becoming aware of their success on their own, and 33 percent (n=15) indicated it was the recognition through the words and vision of their "villagers." As San said:

> My family, you know, they always, my mom and my cousins, um, they would brag about me a lot more than I would, um, about myself, and they would remind me like, "Yo, my San, you've been doing some great things," or "You're really good at this or you're just that and the rest," you know, because we can get into like just human beings, we can get into feeling or like that becoming numb.

Communication with outside family members was an essential factor for all BCOIPs, regardless of their having contact with their incarcerated parents. Research shows that BCOIPs with incarcerated mothers most often resided with their maternal grandparents, while those with incarcerated fathers lived with their mothers (Glaze and Maruschak 2010; Jones and Seabrook 2017). When asked about living arrangements, interviewees reported that they resided and were raised by various individuals. Some "villagers" were excellent listeners, mentors, and safe havens for BCOIPs who reported being taught compassion, forgiveness, morals, and values. In contrast to other interviewees, some struggled as family members voiced negative attitudes towards their incarcerated parents, which ultimately prevented them from having contact as a protective mechanism, forced adult roles and responsibilities (getting a job, rearing younger siblings, etc.), and were abusive (verbally, emotionally, mentally, and physically). Nevertheless, in retrospect, BCOIPs reported that having these negative experiences promoted their resilience. Trenee said:

> And so, when you're in those environments like the main lessons that I've learned that I felt like have helped me a lot is... I look at fighting differently. I have a different type of ambition. Like I'm fighting for my life, in all aspects, because a lot of people don't make it out from where I came from. And I know that I'm not just fighting just for me, but I'm fighting for my mom, I'm fighting for the generations to come after me and to build a legacy for myself so that this isn't repeated.

When asked, "Who held you down emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually,?" some BCOIPs responded their siblings. Like many interviewees who "mothered" their younger siblings, Tiana expressed:

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> I think, actually, I got to give homage to my little brother. I think that with him, he kept me mentally sane because I had to be that big sister for him. So I had to kind of safeguard him from what was going on at the house because he — we're five years apart. So it was like we tried to make that bad situation some good. He helped me down mentally.

BCOIPs leaned on their siblings and friends with similar problems and shared trauma to seek support and comfort. This ultimately promoted positive life outcomes for BCOIPs.

Being raised in a nonnuclear environment created several challenges and stigma for interviewees. They reported being embarrassed at school regarding parent-teacher conferences, daddy-daughter dances, and family discussions with peers. BCOIPs struggled to share their personal story with others; however, they found power in their voices as they were reassured and uplifted by their friends and romantic partners. Brielle shared a conversation with her boyfriend:

> But I'm thinking in my head, oh, he's going to think I'm weak because of what's going on in my house. And he helped me realize you're not weak, you're strong because of what's going on in your house and you're overcoming. And because you're overcoming and you're doing all this stuff, that's your success in and of itself. So, he helped me really start to not only overcome what's going on but seeing, okay, like, this is something that someone else can benefit from hearing.

Many interviewees included community in their definition of success. Success meant that they could give back to their community and those around them; however, it was not a passive activity, such as donating money or making performative gestures of volunteering sparingly. Their giving back included mentorship, entrepreneurship, community organizing, activism, and artistic expression. All of the interviewees were asked, "Do you feel like it is important to give back to your community?" and all agreed. They tended to agree with Kiki's definition of success:

> Success to me is being able to take everything that you learned and give it to somebody else, because if I'm just hoarding it to myself, then what, what really is the success of that? Just me being a selfish person and just being like, "Yeah, look at me. I made it here. I made it there." I think success is continuing to carry on that success to others.

Seventy-six percent (n=45) stated that their inspiration to give back is motivated by others–this included friends, family, and community members. San noted that his "drive to want to be successful [is] for my mom and my little, my youngest brother." Anye stated, "I'm always just trying to do the best that I can for the people around me and to make sure that everyone feels appreciated, that everyone feels love." Success for these interviewees is what is radiated outward to the people around them.

Success for these adult BCOIPs meant being able to help others who are in similar situations. Tina stated that "teaching my sons and teaching others from my mistakes" was a measure of her success. Toni, a community activist, said, "I'm happy with the part that I've been able to play in, you know, many people's lives." Because most interviewees experienced parental incarceration beginning in childhood, reflection has spurred them to want to guide other children of incarcerated parents. One interviewee created a short film that "explores the journey of two sisters, two young sisters whose mom gets arrested for the first time, and they kind of have to navigate this experience and also it explores like their inner emotions about what they're feeling as their mom is preparing to go to prison." Several interviewees were authors. One spoke about the intentionality of writing a book about being a BCOIPs. She said, "when I wrote my book, I wanted to make sure that people felt like, like the people that I was writing about felt like I also still understood them." Another author spoke about the reasons he wrote his book, stating: "I wanted my life, my family, my community to be a microcosm for what people are going through all across the country... and be in a position to aid and support those that went through similar circumstances." The things they had accomplished for possible economic gains were spurred by the community, and they were inspired to give back to them.

Education

Educational attainment is the traditional pathway to success because it influences future income and employment opportunities (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). Most interviewees (n=51;

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86 percent) stated that they had success within education, which was the highest category of self-reported success. As seen in Table 3, 38 interviewees (64 percent) have obtained at least a bachelor's degree, and of the 19 with an associate's degree or a high school diploma, 11 (58 percent) are in school to complete their bachelor's. In other words, 49 (83 percent) BCOIPs have or will have a bachelor's degree. They will join the only 26 percent of the Black population in the United States that matriculated through undergraduate studies (Cheesman Day 2020). Nationally, 9 percent of Black people have a degree higher than a bachelor's (American Council on Education 2020; United States Census Bureau 2020); therefore, the 18 interviewees (31 percent) with post-undergraduate degrees are among this small population. Most of the adult BCOIPs within this study have attained higher educational achievements than their incarcerated parents and the majority of the Black population. As Michael stated:

> I will consider myself successful in the sense that I made it somewhere my family hasn't, you know what I mean. I'm the first to say my parents and some of my other family members to or my immediate family in a way, to graduate high school, to go to college, play a sport in college, you know, all these things.

Although interviewees had high levels of educational attainment and self-reported education as an area of success, within the interviews, only a few personal definitions of success included graduating. Graduation was not a measure of success because for most interviewees, many aspects of their lives remained the same. Kritty stated, "My mom used to always say, 'all I want you to try to do is just graduate high school.' So I looked at my oldest brothers, they graduated high school but they still ended up in prison." The presence of the criminal legal system in their lives did not change due to the number of degrees they held. Parents, family, friends, community members, and interviewees still touched the system in some way. Angela explained, "out of 30 people that I say I probably hung with or went to high school with, only four or five of us went to a college. Four or five of us out of 30 people went to a college."

Additionally, educational success was defined as obtaining the acceptance letter, meeting new people, being away from their neighborhoods and in new spaces, and joining student organizations. Bre did not finish college, but stated that going was a success. For Peaches, she was able to be "free" at college:

> I didn't have all the drama that was at home, going to an event with family members and somebody may fight or people yelling or... I had a sense of normalcy, a sense of... I don't know, it was different. A sense of every time you linked up with your friends, black or white, it was like a hug. White people love hugging, I wasn't used to that.

San emphasized that it was not the material he was learning but his experiences:

> The information that I was getting... I couldn't tell you... but at that time, that's what I felt was most valuable to me and beneficial to me, was that proximity to all of these things that I could kinda, explore, whether it was, like I said opportunities or people.

Table 3. Interviewee's Highest Level of Education

Some High School	**1**	**2%**
GED/high school diploma	15	25%
Associate's Degree	3	5%
Bachelor's Degree	20	34%
Master's Degree	14	24%
PhD	3	5%
JD	1	2%
Unknown	2	3%
Total	59	100%

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Educational success went beyond the degree, skills, or information learned. Higher education, in particular, was seen as an accomplishment, even if there was not the completion of the degree.

Research has found that educational success depends upon parental attitudes toward education, not only on a parent's academic status (Topor et al. 2010). Black parents are more invested in their child's education than most educational research suggests (Fields-Smith 2020). Interviewees showed that their incarcerated parent influenced their academic success. Vicki stated:

> My dad would, um, send me all kind of letters of like encouragement. My dad would, um, send me books to read, or like, I don't know if he ordered books from inside. Somehow they would get me books.... My dad literally, when I was in 6th to 8th grade, he told me, he was like, "Let me know what your, uh, your guidance counselor need me, send me his information. I wanna write him. I wanna make sure that like he's giving you the best options for like high school and stuff." My dad was in contact with my guidance counselor via prison.

Her testimony was not the only one highlighting an incarcerated parent's attentiveness toward their children's education. Justin stated, "He used to help me with my homework over the phone. Yeah, he helped me with my homework from elementary on up, middle school." Research often highlights the lack of engagement of incarcerated parents in their child's education; however, these adult BCOIPs often reflected the opposite, saying they had parental encouragement.

Racism and classism influence their educational attainment, arguably, more than their parental incarceration (Miller and Barnes 2015; Murray et al. 2012; Nichols, Loper, and Meyer 2016; Williams 2022). The majority of interviewees were raised in low-income, urban areas, where high quality education can be scarce (Center for Advancing Opportunity and Gallup 2020). Black students' hardships during their K-12 school years are widespread, and BCOIPs are especially disenfranchised. Interviewees spoke about institutional barriers in their schooling; this included lack of access to critical resources, discrimination from teachers and peers, and affordability of extracurricular activities. Jessica spoke about the racism she endured from teachers:

> I had my first white teacher ever... this teacher was like, she was awful. I remember her name was [removed]. Um, I was a great student in [removed], a great student in [removed], behavior-wise and academics. Never had a issue. My school in [removed] was actually like one of the best in the county... I got there and she tried to say, I had a really thick accent back then. She said that she had no faith that I would make it to college and she was struggling to see me graduating from high school.

It is not rare for BCOIPs to be underestimated in their academic abilities due to discouragement from the school system. Mentors and school educators often stepped in when the school system was deficient. Jamie stated, "I had some teachers that cared, that... reached out and made sure I got into certain programs." Ryley had a similar situation stating:

> I don't think to this day [removed] understood how much... she helped me. Like legit, I'm a Black woman, young Black teacher came in there, was like, "You wanna go to school? Come on. I'ma help find you some money for school and show you how to do this.

These mentors helped them to reach their educational goals in ways the system had discouraged them by paying for their sports equipment, housing them, or even taking them on college visits. Interviewees who defined success as some educational attainment also spoke about community outreach. This could be due to the help they received from others, and they want to do the same.

Mental Health and Self-Care

Disrupted living situations, schooling, healthcare, and institutional racism influence the mental health of BCOIPs (Davis and Shlafer 2017; Zeman, Dallaire, and Borowski 2016). However, a contributor to the success of interviewees has been the use and application of positive coping skills and self-care. Although these are atypical parameters of positive life outcomes, the majority of interviewees said

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"being in a place of peace" (Nal) and "driving through trauma" (Bree) are successes of theirs. When defining success, nearly all interviewees' definitions included their mental health status, emotional care, self-care, and/or having a purpose. San stated, "success for me is when you are doing something that like aligns with you and you got a special feeling." Brandon noted that success was "happiness and peace." Similarly, Daws stated, "it's just more so about things that make you happy, and you just feel good about your life and the things that you're doing, to help yourself and others."

Although some adult BCOIPs sought therapy when they were older, some had intervention earlier. Most do not have a guidance counselor like Taylor in high school to help them. Taylor explains:

> So my guidance counselor was like, "Something's going on with you, like you just went crazy on the teacher'cause she mentioned your mom." And that's when I actually told my guidance counselor that my mom was in prison. She was like, "Wow, like, no one let us know. We didn't know." And I'm just like, "Yeah," so she put me in this, um, this poetry class and actually there was like 10 other kids in there whose parents were in prison, too. And I was like, I walked past y'all every day and didn't even know that like y'all had the same issue.

"T" stated that she went to therapy because her school counselor referred her. By the time she was 16, "T" said, "[I was] in an abusive relationship... I had an eating disorder, I was cutting myself, I was abusing drugs and alcohol." Interventions from her coach, therapy, and particularly her formerly incarcerated mother, pushed her to apply to college and remove herself from her abusive relationship. By providing services and opportunities for BCOIPs to learn coping skills and express themselves, researchers have found that behavioral issues can be mitigated earlier in their lives.

Parental incarceration has lifetime effects; therefore, interviewees employed many coping techniques to protect themselves emotionally. Into adulthood, some sought professional therapy and counseling, which aided their emotional intelligence. Des, whose mother and father were incarcerated, stated:

> I hold grudges very much so, like so when somebody wrong me once, I never forget. Like, it's, it's just hard for me, and that's what I, that's what I'm going to therapy for, like trying to get over that, because... [my therapist] says that's like my abandonment issues, from my mother.

Therapy, counseling, and other self-reflexive outlets gave interviewees a chance to "heal" themselves emotionally. Interviewees expressed the "emotional work" they have done and are continuing to do to forgive their parents for their past decisions and criminal involvement. Rashad explained a valuable insight:

> realizing that forgiveness means that the person will never ever change, they may not ever change. You change. And that's okay. You're not forgiving somebody in hopes that they will change, you are forgiving them to release that negative energy that you have within yourself towards him.

Mary, like Rashad, was working on the forgiveness of her mother. She stated, "I believe that I have forgiven my mother for being incarcerated. I think I just forgave her maybe like in 2016. 'Cause I didn't even know I needed to." Mary was 40 years old when this forgiveness occurred. Many interviewees exercised the notion of "releasing that negative energy" by writing letters to their parents, crying, and/or doing therapeutic work. Nal stated that she had to discover her feelings and emotions:

> You get addicted to the pain, you know what I'm saying? So even though you might know what to do, I really had to learn something that was gonna be able to help me suspend my judgments against my own self.

Mary, like Nal, used self-discovery to identify emotions she did not know she had, because they were manifesting in her marriage and parenting:

> it wasn't until marriage that I, the marriage counseling, that I said, you know, "I probably need to give this some attention because this make, this story makes up much of who I am, which drives internal behaviors, external behaviors, um, that come out as a mother, that show up as a wife.

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Faith also saw the toll it took on her and sought therapy at 21. She summarizes therapy's value this way: "So after therapy, I started realizing I am who I am. It's nobody's fault. Things happen the way that they happen but that doesn't make me a bad person or I don't have a reason to have shame." Although ACEs occurred in childhood and adolescence, therapy, counseling, and other emotional outlets helped adult BCOIPs overcome their pasts and move toward a path of success and break their "generational curses" (Nal).

DISCUSSION

The current study examined conceptualizations of success using in-depth qualitative interviews with adult Black children of incarcerated parents. Racist and deficit model insights have shaped most prior literature on children of incarcerated parents. Research is limited in its incorporation of the personal insights of BCOIPs themselves. Interest convergence applies to academic scholarship, which uplifts individual stories that fit a particular narrative. This study highlights the importance of centering the narratives, perspectives, and social thought processes of BCOIPs to allow a counter-story to emerge. BCOIPs' definitions of success challenge the dominant ideologies about intergenerational cycles of incarceration, incorporate intersectional experiences that show the humanity among BCOIPs, and display the unique voices among children of incarcerated parents of color. BCOIPs have been sharing stories of resilience and success all along. These stories are often published outside of research articles and are seen in non-academic books authored by Black adult children of incarcerated parents (see, Frazer 2021; Hogan 2020; Moody 2021) who share dynamic stories through a Black gaze that offers true tales of resilience, faith, hope, love, justice, and freedom. The works of directly impacted BCOIPs scholars (Hollins 2022) should be highlighted as a means to shift the Eurocentric and capitalistic viewpoints that currently saturate research and guide national policy.

In this study, BCOIPs' social thought processes about personal success were not centered around intergenerational incarceration. Instead, they envisioned success as a life of happiness, love, community service, and doing those things that make them feel appreciated, desired, and connected to their incarcerated parents. The research focused on deficiency among this population has done a disservice in minimizing the humanity of BCOIPs. Through a white gaze, children of incarcerated parents have been dehumanized directly because of their "guilty by association" connection to an incarcerated parent. This stigmatizes, silences, and discounts a substantial population of individuals who have direct experiences and expert narratives that can be used to assist policymakers, community organizations, and schools with shifting societal perceptions and tailoring resources for BCOIPs to invest in their futures. The voices of those directly impacted should be sought out and centered in research, policy development, community initiatives, and educational institutions. Our findings provide unique perspectives from adult BCOIPs who have experienced life in ways that many other adult children have. BCOIPs are Black children and should be apart of the discussion anytime their lives and futures are addressed. Their voices should be heard, and their social thought should be embraced to advance social justice directly connected to the criminal injustices experienced by a legal system rooted in systematic racism.

LIMITATIONS

The data used in this study are a part of a more extensive research study on the resiliency and successes of children of incarcerated parents. This is a limitation because of the nature of the project and that interviewees self-identified as successes. *Although interviewees typically embodied a humble approach within their interviews, they still viewed themselves as having success which attracted them to the study*. This project uses qualitative methodology; therefore, it is not generalizable but exploratory. Future research should use a more comprehensive sample of BCOIPs to include children, adolescents, and adults and should refrain from focusing on a deficit model to gain a holistic view of this population.

CONCLUSION

BCOIPs are given a societal status of "at-risk," which literature and scholarship reinforce. Only recently has literature explored their successes despite having several ACEs. Scholarship measures their

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success by middle-class standards that uplift economics, college graduation, marriage, and children as the indicators of positive life outcomes. This study shows a counternarrative to what adult BCOIPs view as success and elevates their experiences from their viewpoint. Their definitions of success include their relationships with others, giving back to the community, educational backgrounds, and improving their mental health.

Using a CRT perspective, one can see how the narratives we know about success are from a Eurocentric and capitalistic viewpoint. Using this deficit lens, programs and resources will continue to operate in ways that do not fully help the population in the ways they need. BCOIPs are conscious thinkers with perspectives that can help reimagine all Black children's lives and futures. Programming and resources to maintain relationships with incarcerated parents, counseling services for children and adults experiencing parental incarceration, educational support in K-12 and higher education, and resources for "villagers" to support BCOIPs are a few examples provided by interviewees to aid those in similar situations. The systems built to serve children of incarcerated parents were not made with their input; therefore, they are shaped in the image of what others think they need. In addition, structural and institutional racism continue to proliferate in the criminal legal system and society and put BCOIPs at a disadvantage. However, all showed resilience, strength, and determination to succeed. Despite many hardships, their positive outlooks and hard work led to their success, which was nurtured with love, support, and motivation from their incarcerated parents. As Kenya stated:

> Some of the things I experienced, even at Howard, I'm like, this is nothing.... Because I've been through worse. So for me, it's just like being able to bounce back, like don't, like don't dwell, like, you gotta just get up, take it as a learning lesson and keep fighting 'cause you're not dead yet... It's not over. It doesn't end till you dead. And even then I feel like it's a different playing field, but.... It's not over yet. Every day is a new opportunity. Like you f***** up yesterday but you can get up and do better today.... So it's just being able to keep going, like you gotta keep going. You can't let yourself feel it too long. It's okay to feel it, accept it, but you gotta process it and keep it moving.

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